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## [Book review of:] Black middle class Britannia: identities, repertoires, cultural consumption

Slootman, Marieke

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**Black middle class Britannia: Identities, repertoires, cultural consumption**, by Ali Meghji, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2019, x+179pp., £80 (hardcover) ISBN 978-1-5261-4307-5.

Minority middle classes deserve more scholarly attention. In many societies, racial and ethnic minorities, slowly but persistently, despite many structural barriers, become middle class.

This often leads to confusion, uneasiness and even distrust in Western societies, where middle-classness is generally associated with whiteness and sociocultural assimilation to the established white middle-class codes, interests and networks. How do minority middle-class individuals negotiate their positions and craft their identities in these contexts?

Meghji's book is a relevant contribution to this field, shining light on the identifications and cultural consumption of Black middle-class Britons. Based on participant observation in cultural spaces and qualitative interviews, Meghji develops a tripartite model, a 'triangle of Black middle-class identity', arguing that Black middle-class individuals are either oriented towards a 'strategic assimilation' identity mode, a 'class-minded' mode, or an 'ethnoracial autonomous' mode.

The biggest strength of the book is how it nuances thinking about minority identification and positioning. First of all, this lies in the formulation of three identity modes (which reminds me of Berry's acculturation model, which presents four combinations of two identity orientations: integration, separation, assimilation and marginalization). Even more so, its strength lies in the separation and juxtaposing of behaviour and discourse. Meghji argues that the same behaviour, such as consuming white middle-class culture (visit mainstream art galleries, theatre halls, opera houses and classical music concert halls) can be rooted in different

attitudes. Individuals who are oriented towards the strategic assimilation mode use a repertoire of cultural equity and code-switching. They want to achieve parity between Black and white people, and are involved in both white and Black contexts, each time adjusting to the dominant codes. In contrast, class-minded individuals articulate a post-racialist discourse ('society is not racist anymore'). They have a singular orientation towards the white middle-class codes, and refrain from consuming Black culture. They distance themselves from other Blacks, whom they refer to as 'less cultured'. Individuals who are oriented towards the strategic assimilation mode and those oriented towards the ethnoracial autonomous mode both consume Black culture (works that ascribe legitimacy to Black histories, narratives and knowledges, and counter negative stereotypes). While for the first group, this relates to their double orientation and pursuit of equity, the second group employs a repertoire of browning and Afro-centrism. While the first group is open to whites engaging with Black culture, the latter argues that in order to appreciate and develop Black identity and knowledge, these spaces need to be shielded from the dominant, hierarchical racial frames; from whites.

I see many parallels with the middle-class ethnic minorities in the Dutch context whom I studied (Slootman, Ethnic identity, social mobility and the role of soulmates, Cham, Springer, 2018). I recognize the persistent, unavoidable salience of ethnicity/race, which requires a continuous usage of coping strategies. I also recognize the existence of various strategies, which in the Dutch case ranged from a weary, strategic or rebellious adoption of the minority label to an explicit contestation of this label, while trying to re-educate the audience and change negative stereotypes.

My findings however show that the employment of strategies does not vary between persons but between moments. Meghji's presentation of identity modes that individuals 'tend

towards', paints a too-static picture that does not do justice to the contextuality of behaviour, attitudes and discourses. I observed a contextuality and 'double discursive competence', indicating that the audience, and even the mood of the individual, influence the behavioural and discursive strategies individuals employ in particular interactions on particular moments. This raises the question whether the used method allows Meghji to speak of individuals tending towards a specific identity mode that is grounded in a specific discursive repertoire. This seems difficult to conclude based on observing settings instead of following individuals during a longer period, and with onetime interviews. Although Meghji makes the reservation that individuals cannot be fully reduced to one identity mode, the designed model is based on the dominance of one mode, instead of the contextual use of identity modes. It could very well be that individuals whom Meghji labelled as 'towards the ethnoracial autonomous mode', as in their interaction they used a repertoire of 'browning', use a repertoire of 'equity' at another moment. I suggest to regard the tripartite model as a set of identity modes, or discursive and behavioural repertoires, that individuals *can employ* rather than *tend towards*. By regarding the three modes as a set of ethnic/racial options that are available to individuals, the follow-up question becomes: When and why do individuals employ the various modes?

The analysis would also benefit from a more intersectional view of Blackness. While the book explicitly focusses on the intersection of *middle-class whiteness*, it speaks of Blackness in general, and refrains from distinguishing between lower-class and middle-class practices and identities. Although Black practices and identities have developed in a lower-class context and have lower-class connotations, the pioneering middle class is developing new identities, reshaping Blackness. As Meghji's descriptions of Black cultural spaces clearly illustrate, in new middle-class black spaces – which I call 'Soulmate spaces' – minority identities are (re-

)articulated, and repertoires and interpretive frameworks are (re-)formulated. With a singular usage of 'Blackness', it is easy to overlook these developments.

Meghji convincingly exposes the exclusionary whiteness of mainstream middle-class cultural spaces and compellingly illustrates how (subtle) practices of exclusion are experienced by Black individuals. Studies like this one are important in their revealing of the interaction between an exclusionary societal context and the agency of individuals. Meghji's identification of three repertoires shows that, even within coercive structures where race is salient all the times, individual have some choice in how they respond to and negotiate with these forceful structures; they do have ethnic/racial options. A more contextual and intersectional approach could be a next step in enhancing our understanding of identifications.

Marieke Sloomman

Department of Sociology

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

m.w.sloomman@vu.nl